

Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SR-02 ORM-01 AID-05 IO-10 CIAE-00

DODE-00 PM-03 H-01 INR-05 L-02 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01

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FM AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1784

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: EAID, PFOR, SREF, LA

SUBJECT: AID TO REFUGEES

REF: VIENTIANE 8891

1. ACTING USAID DIRECTOR RAMSEY AND I MET WITH MINISTER OF INTERIOR PHENG PHONGSAVAN AND DIRECTOR GENERAL OF SOCIAL WELFARE DECEMBER 11 AT MINISTER'S REQUEST. MINISTER REFERRED TO OUR CONVERSATION IN LUANG PRABANG AND SAID HE WANTED TO TALK ABOUT REFUGEES. THEY FELL IN TWO CATEGORIES: THOSE WHO WANTED TO STAY IN VIENTIANE SIDE ZONE AND THOSE WHO WOULD WANT TO RETURN TO PL ZONE. HE SAID TWO SIDES WERE DISCUSSING IN THE JCIA THE LATTER CATEGORY, BUT HE WAS PESSIMISTIC THAT AGREEMENT WOULD BE REACHED ALLOWING ANY SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF REFUGEES TO MOVE BACK TO THEIR HOMES THIS COMING SEASON. SUCH MOVEMENTS WOULD HAVE TO TAKE PLACE PRIOR TO NEXT MARCH IN ORDER THAT REFUGEES PREPARE THE LAND AND PLANT RICE FOR HARVEST A YEAR FROM NOW. IN HIS VIEW PL SIDE WOULD SIMPLY NOT AGREE TO VIENTIANE SIDE OFFICIALS OR OTHER INTERESTED PARTIES MOVING IN THEIR ZONE TO OVERSEE RETURN OF REFUGEES NOR WOULD PL GRANT REFUGEES FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT BETWEEN TWO ZONES. HE DID NOT SEE EARLY OR EASY SOLUTION TO THESE ISSUES.

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2. THE MINISTER THEN RAISED SUBJECT OF U.S. FOOD SUPPORT

POLICY THAT HAD BEEN TRANSMITTED TO HIM IN THE AMBASSADOR'S NOVEMBER 21 LETTER REFERRED TO IN REFTEL. PHENG RECOGNIZED THAT IN PAST YEARS IT HAD BEEN NORMAL PRACTICE TO REDUCE RICE RATIONS TO REFUGEES AT HARVEST TIME. THERE WERE HOWEVER AREAS IN LAOS, HE ASSERTED, WHERE THE HARVEST WAS NOT PLENTIFUL AND REFUGEES WOULD RATHER QUICKLY RUN OUT OF RICE AND NEED HELP. IT WAS IMPORTANT, HE EMPHASIZED, THAT ALL REFUGEES RECEIVE ADEQUATE SUPPORT UNTIL THEY WERE FINALLY SETTLED.

3. WE ANSWERED WE WERE ADDRESSING, FOR THE TIME BEING, QUESTION OF REFUGEES REMAINING IN VIENTIANE ZONE SINCE, AS HE HIMSELF HAD POINTED OUT, NATURE AND MAGNITUDE OF PROBLEM OF MOVING REFUGEES BACK TO ORIGINAL HOMES HAD NOT EVEN BEEN BEGUN TO BE DEFINED. WE WOULD OF COURSE BE PREPARED TO CONSIDER THIS PROBLEM WHEN WE ALL KNEW WHAT IT WAS. RIGHT NOW WE WERE TALKING OF PEOPLE WHO HAD BEEN SETTLED FOR SOME TIME AND, ACCORDING TO OUR INFORMATION, THE BULK OF THEM HAD RAISED A GOOD CROP THIS YEAR. IT WAS VERY IMPORTANT, WE CONTINUED, THAT THEY BECOME SELF-RELIANT; THEY HAD THE MEANS, THEY SHOULD HAVE THE INCENTIVE. IT WAS ESSENTIALLY UNHEALTHY TO HAVE THEM REMAIN DEPENDENT ON OUTSIDE SUPPORT. FURTHERMORE, CONTINUING SUPPORT COULD DISCOURAGE PRODUCTION. HE HIMSELF HAD RECOGNIZED DESIRABILITY OF ACHIEVING SELF-SUFFICIENCY WHEN LAST SPRING HE HAD SENT NOTICE TO ALL CHAO KHEOUNGS DIRECTING THEM TO URGE REFUGEES TO RAISE ENOUGH RICE TO SEE THEM THROUGH NEXT HARVEST. WE THEREFORE BELIEVED THAT WE WERE IN AGREEMENT ON OBJECTIVE. NEVERTHELESS, AS THE AMBASSADOR HAD SAID IN HIS LETTER, WE RECOGNIZED THAT THERE WERE FOOD DEFICIENCIES. WE WOULD PROVIDE PL-480 FOODS TO THOSE WHO RAN OUT OF RICE AND WE WERE CONTINUING TO PROVIDE BOTH RICE AND PL-480 FOODS TO CERTAIN INDIGENT GROUPS, SUCH AS THE LEPERS, WHO SIMPLY DID NOT HAVE THE MEANS OF RAISING THEIR OWN FOOD.

4. THOUGH PHENG RECOGNIZED PL-480 FOODS WERE VERY NUTRITIOUS, HE POINTED OUT THAT LAO PEOPLE NEEDED RICE AS A STAPLE. PL-480 SHOULD BE A SUPPLEMENT, NOT A REPLACEMENT FOR RICE. LAO PEOPLE, HE SAID, DID NOT LIKE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PL-480 FOODS; THEY MUST HAVE RICE. WE ANSWERED BY EMPHASIZING THAT WHAT WAS IMPORTANT AT THIS JUNCTURE WAS TO STRESS TO THE REFUGEES THROUGH THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNORS AND SOCIAL WELFARE REPRESENTATIVES IN THE PROVINCES THAT THEY MUST BE VERY FRUGAL WITH THEIR OWN RICE HARVEST, MAKE IT LAST AS LONG AS POSSIBLE AND UNDERSTAND THAT THEY WOULD NOT BE PROVIDED RICE IF THEIR OWN STOCKS RAN OUT. I STRESSED THIS POINT STRONGLY SEVERAL TIMES AND STATED

TO THE MINISTER THAT NEITHER I NOR THE ACTING USAID DIRECTOR HAD THE AUTHORITY TO OFFER ANY HOPE THAT ANY RICE WOULD BE MADE AVAILABLE LATER IN THE YEAR THROUGH THE USAID PROGRAM.

5. WHAT WAS OF GREATEST CONCERN TO HIM AND THE PRIME MINISTER, THE MINISTER CONCLUDED, WAS THAT SINCE HE DIDN'T ASSUME VERY MANY REFUGEES WOULD BE MOVING TO THEIR ORIGINAL HOMES IN THE PL ZONE THIS SEASON, THOSE WHO DID REMAIN IN THE VIENTIANE ZONE SHOULD BE WELL TREATED. WHEN THEY FINALLY MOVED THEY WOULD THEN HAVE A GOOD MEMORY, "BON SOUVENIR," OF THE VIENTIANE SIDE. IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT THE REFUGEES DID NOT GET THE IMPRESSION THAT THEY WERE BEING FORCED TO MOVE OR THAT THE VIENTIANE SIDE WAS "TURNING ITS BACK" ON THEM.

6. WE ENDED THE DISCUSSION ON THE UNDERSTANDING THAT RICE AND PL-480 FOODS WOULD CONTINUE TO BE MADE AVAILABLE TO CERTAIN LIMITED CATEGORIES OF INDIGENT GROUPS, THAT ONLY PL-480 FOODS WOULD BE PROVIDED OTHER REFUGEES WHO NEEDED SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION, THAT THE SOCIAL WELFARE SERVICE WOULD REVIEW THE REFUGEE SITUATION IN EACH REGION, INFORM THE REFUGEES THAT THEY SHOULD DEPEND ON THEIR RICE STOCKS FOR THEIR RICE SUPPLY, AND THAT WE WOULD CONSIDER JUSTIFIED EXCEPTIONS AS THEY MIGHT COME UP DURING THE COURSE OF THE YEAR. WE HELD OUT NO HOPE HOWEVER THAT EVEN SUCH EXCEPTIONS MIGHT RECEIVE ANYTHING MORE THAN PL-480 FOODS.
CHAPMAN

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